

ALDEN HOUSE

DUXBURY HISTORY FILE
REFERENCEThe John Alden House
Duxbury, Massachusetts

A NARRATIVE HISTORY

Note: The following article written by Alden Museum Curator, Linda Ashley, appears in the spring, 1998 edition of the Mayflower Quarterly. Used with permission of the Mayflower Society. Several other articles related to the Alden and Mullins families and the barn project, currently underway, appear in the same issue. There are many photographs including full-color photos of the Alden House and Mullins home in Dorking, England on the front & rear covers.

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"The John Alden House has a fascination far beyond its architectural significance. It is a 17th century house, a Pilgrims' home, that has survived the long years without any distracting or detracting alterations. It is a very real old house, built by Aldens for generations of Aldens."

John and Priscilla AldenThe Duxbury House and LandOwners of the Alden HouseThe House Today

It would be difficult to write a better summary of the significance of the John Alden House than that written by Dorothy Wentworth in the foreword to her publication, *The Alden Family in the Alden House*. There are houses built in the 17th century, but few have survived without "improvements" such as plumbing, electricity, and modern kitchens. That the property which was granted to the Aldens in the 1620's has never been owned by any other family is remarkable, if not without parallel among historical sites. Today the property is owned by the family association, the Alden Kindred of America.

John and Priscilla Alden

We actually know very little about John Alden and his wife, Priscilla Mullins, and their lives together. Assumptions can be made about their ages upon arrival in Plymouth- Because we know his death date, September 22, 1687, and his approximate age then, he is presumed to have been born in 1599 or 1600, making him about 21 years of age. There is no record of Priscilla's birth, but it is generally assumed that she was younger, probably in her mid to late teens. Her father, mother, and brother all died during that wretched first winter in Plymouth. According to her father's will, she had a sister and a brother in England. The brother, William, eventually came to the colonies. There is also no record of her death, though tradition holds that she lived until about 1680 and John's will indicates that she died by 1687.

It appears that John Alden and Priscilla Mullins were married in 1621 or 1622, perhaps the third marriage in Plimoth Colony. Both received their part of divisions made the original settlers in 1623 and 1627. They had ten documented children and perhaps another who died young. These few facts and assumptions are all we know of Priscilla.

Of John, there are a few more records. He was a cooper, or barrel maker, signed on as the Mayflower was being provisioned in Southampton, England, to care for the barrels and casks which held the beer, water, and other provisions for the crossing and early settlement. There is no definitive proof of his family in England, though he may have been related to Aldens in Harwich. He was the youngest signer of the Mayflower Compact, and, as it happened, was the last signer to die. By 1627, he had become one of the substantial men of the colony, able to be one of the "Undertakers" who contracted to buy out the Merchant Adventurers, or venture capitalists, who had backed the colony. He served as Assistant Governor of Plimoth Colony, elected annually, for a number of years and Deputy Governor at least twice. He served as Treasurer of the colony and on the Council of War. He served as Magistrate, in which capacity he performed marriages, including that of his daughter, Ruth, to John Bass of Braintree, and perhaps others of his children. He bought and sold land. He was accused of murder in Massachusetts Bay Colony, but was not brought to trial. He believed that Quakers were heretics and acted accordingly. Some contemporary records indicate that John became quite conservative, if not "difficult" in his older days, in contrast to an earlier mild temper. Beyond that brief outline, little else is known of John Alden.

Yet, of all the Pilgrim women, the name of Priscilla Mullins Alden is arguably the best known, and many who could not name another Pilgrim can readily recall John Alden. This is because of the poem, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, written by their descendant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, which was part of the education of American school children for decades. The merits of the poem nor the truth of the story will not be discussed here, but the memorable phrases, "Speak for yourself, John," and "If I am not worth the wooing, then surely I am not worth the winning," have placed the Aldens solidly into American lore and increase the public interest in the house.

John and Priscilla's first home was in Plymouth. The exact date when they moved into a home of their own is not known, but certainly by 1627 they were living across from the Governor's house and near the fort. This is the house which is replicated in today's Plimoth Plantation. A stone at the foot of Burial Hill commemorates the Plymouth house.

The Duxbury House and Land

In 1627, John and Priscilla received land in Duxbury as part of the Second Land Division to the original settlers. They apparently built a house on the land at that time, and began living there through the growing season each year, returning to Plymouth during the winters as required by the leaders of the colony. In 1632, the settlers were allowed to remain year-around on their farms. Soon thereafter, the Alden property in Plymouth reverted to the colony.

The land in Duxbury was bounded on the east and south by the Blue Fish River. The north boundary was the present St. George Street, as it remains. To the west, the property ran to the present Bow Street and followed that line south, along the present 3A, to Hound's Ditch. The later homes of Thomas and Sarah Alden Southworth, of Judah Alden, and of David and Mary Alden Cushman (now the Duxbury Wildlife refuge) were all built within those bounds. Today that property includes the Duxbury Art Complex, the Duxbury Public Library, the natatorium, and two schools. The house lot owned by the Alden Kindred today is a little less than three acres.

Though the Aldens had no choice - the grants were drawn by lot - the location of the property was excellent. The land itself was good for farming and had actually been cleared for that purpose by native Americans. They, however, had been decimated by an epidemic before the landing of the Mayflower, and so the land was unoccupied. It was accessible by water from the bay and up the Blue Fish River, and along Hound's Ditch, an important asset when most transportation was by water and no wagon paths existed. Along the western boundary was the path leading from Plymouth past Duxbury, on to Green Harbor (now Marshfield), and eventually on to Boston. There was a fresh water stream, a pond, and at least one spring. There were fresh and salt meadows, supplying hay for cattle. Altogether, it appears that John and Priscilla were fortunate in the drawing, and certainly the land has proved satisfactory to the Alden family for almost 400 years.

There is no actual record of houses built by John Alden on his property. However, John probably began his first house in Duxbury when he received the land, in 1627, and by 1632 he and his family were living year-around there and so must have had a house. In 1960, the Alden Kindred contracted with Roland Robbins, an archeologist best known for the discovery of David Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond, to fix the location of this first house, and excavate the site.

The site was located a only few feet from where it was traditionally thought to have been, about 200 yards east of the present structure.. This was on a small knoll, "high and dry", a short distance from the river. To the south, within a convenient distance, was a spring. Measurements found the house to have been 38 feet long and 10 1/2 feet wide, proportions in keeping with a traditional English cottage, and similar to the outline of the Miles Standish house which also stood in Duxbury. Evidence of locally fired bricks, probably part of the fireplace and chimney, were found, along with fragments of leaded diamond-paned windows. A stone-lined cellar hole remained. However, no part of the wooden structure was found except for hand-wrought nails. Robbins reported his findings and conclusions in a booklet, still available for purchase, entitled, *Pilgrim John Alden's Progress*.

There is also no evidence to date the building of a larger house on the property. Tradition holds, however, that the present John Alden House was built in 1653, and there is also little evidence to the contrary. It has the proportions, roof outline, floor plan, and chimney stack of other houses of the mid-to-late 17th century. In 1653, John would have been about 54 years old, probably still strong and healthy but also mindful that he would not always be able to undertake the enormous physical demands of building a house. John and Priscilla had eight, or perhaps nine, children living with them at that time - quite a crowd for the tiny original house. Their son Jonathan, who lived in the larger house until his death, apparently helped build it. He was twenty-one in 1653, a likely age for a young man to think of preparing a home for himself and, perhaps, a family of his own. There are those, however, who believe the house was built perhaps twenty or thirty years later. It may never be possible to prove an exact date, but it certainly is a 17th century house of exceptional merit.

Why they would choose another knoll further inland for the new house is a matter for speculation. It is actually located in the curve of a fresh water stream, which may have been significant. Some have suggested that hurricanes during their time in the older house might have influenced their decision. Or, they simply may have thought it was a pretty spot.

The house is, of course, of post and beam construction. Each piece is mortised, or fitted into the next, and pinned with wooden pegs, some almost a foot long. There are windbraces, forming triangular supports, not only on the outer four corners, but also on the interior beams. The posts are gunstock shaped; the beams are chamfered, both for attractiveness and to help prevent damage to any head that might happen to hit one. The original windows may have been typical English leaded glass, but if so, they have long-since been replaced with a variety of windows, mostly 12 over 12 double hung.

The kitchen gives every appearance of being older than the rest of the house, both in style and in the size and cut of the boards. It was the conclusion of Roland Robbins and others that this section of the house is actually the original 1627 house, moved from its location about 200 yards and incorporated into the new dwelling. That lumber was labor intensive and valuable would make it reasonable to make use of a smaller building in this way. The widest board in the kitchen is 27 3/4 inches wide. Included in this oldest section is a small butt'ry or pantry on one end and a "borning room" on the other.

The butt'ry, was so called not because it was for making or storing butter, though it may also have been used as a dairy room,, but because it was used to store butts, or half-barrels of food supplies. There is a trap door in the floor of this room, leading to a stone-lined cellar used for further storage.

The "borning room" was probably simply the only separate bedroom in 1627, but to be able to designate a family "infirmary" was one of the benefits of the larger house. As many as 25 or 30 children may have been born in this particular room, and no doubt family members also died there. No one had heard of germs in the earliest days, but they did understand quarantine, and would keep the sick apart from others. The "borning room" was always near the warm fireplace and kitchen to facilitate the care of the sick.

Above this old section is a long "workroom," warmed by the chimney stack, where winter spinning, weaving, and other tasks would be done. On either end are small bedrooms. This was probably simply a loft in the original house. A staircase leads from the kitchen to the workroom and on up to the open attic.

Two small bedrooms, designated a child's room and "Aunt Polly Alden's room," are on either end of the workroom, above the old section of the house.

The "newer" section of the house consists of four large rooms and a "good morning," or double staircase leading from the small entry hall to each of the two upper chambers.

Downstairs, the rooms are called the "great room" and the "parlor." The great room has an original oyster and clam shell plaster ceiling. Each room has a fireplace, both "modernized," probably in the early 1800's. Through the centuries, these rooms have no doubt been used for many purposes - as living room, dining room, and bedrooms, as well as for business, town, and religious meetings, government business, weddings, and funerals, and maybe even trials held by the magistrate, John Alden.

Upstairs are found two large bedrooms. The "eastern chamber" or "family bedroom" has a fireplace and also has a "heatolator" block in the floor which can be removed to allow heat from downstairs to rise into the room. The "western chamber" or "guest room" does not have a fireplace. Some heat from the warm chimney can be allowed into the room by opening a door.

A full attic, impressive in size and resembling a barn with open posts and beams, covers the new and old sections.

Attached to the back of the house is an ell, probably added in the mid 1800's to serve as a summer kitchen. It may actually have been an older building, perhaps a sheep shed, which was moved from elsewhere on the property.

The furniture, decorative pieces, kitchen equipment, and personal items represent the 300 years the house was occupied. There is no furniture known to have been owned by John and Priscilla. However, a bonnet, or coif, believed to have been Priscilla's and which has been authenticated as being from the period, is lovingly preserved in the upstairs chamber.

There is a well conveniently close to the back door. Early drawings show a well sweep, an arrangement consisting of a long pole balanced on a pivot, which facilitated the drawing of water. Apparently the water table was affected by the building of the railroad a few feet from the western side of the house in the late 1800's, since the water appears now to be too low to use a well sweep. The sweep has, however,

been restored for interest.

Photographs from the 1800's show a long barn or shed. At present the Alden Kindred are building a barn on the same location. It is said that it isn't like John Alden's barn, but the one he really wanted. It has been carefully designed to blend with the existing structure. It will have modern conveniences, including heat, which will allow the museum to continue programming throughout the year. Before building was begun, the University of Massachusetts conducted archaeological surveys to ensure that nothing significant would be lost. The dirt taken from the excavation has been preserved and will be sifted by Duxbury school children. They will be delighted with shards of pottery and glassware and small implements which were apparently tossed behind the barn in the late 1800's.

No evidence has been found for other outbuildings, but through the centuries there must have been barns and privies, and chicken coops, storage sheds, and woodsheds. Perhaps John Alden had his cooper shop conveniently near the house. Future study may shed light on those import aspects of the property's history.

Owners of the Alden House

John Alden distributed his property to his children before his death. The inventory of his estate, in 1687, consists entirely of the personal property he would have kept, such as his horse, cattle, sheep, and swine; his tools, including his cooper's tools; a little furniture and some kitchen equipment which might indicate that he had his own room and fireplace; and his clothing.

In a deed, dated January 1, 1684/5, John Alden gave all his Duxbury land, "from the day of my death," to Jonathan Alden. He is apparently the fifth of John and Priscilla's documented children, and the third son. The oldest brother, John, Jr., was a mariner living in Boston, and the second, Joseph, was living in Bridgewater.

Jonathan, who was probably born in Plymouth in 1632, married Abigail Hallett in 1672. They apparently continued to live in the house with his parents (Priscilla may have already died) and perhaps his unmarried sisters. Jonathan and Abigail had six children of their own, three boys and three girls.

Jonathan Alden died in 1697. All his children were still quite young; the oldest about 24, and the youngest about 10 years of age. While Abigail seems to have been a capable woman, her husband's family no doubt gave her needed assistance. All the heirs agreed that the house and property would now belong to the oldest son, John Alden, who was about 16 years old when his father died, and about 22 when the estate was settled..

This John Alden, usually titled "Col. John," his militia rank, was born c.1681. In 1709, he married Hannah Briggs of Scituate. They were the parents of four sons and three daughters, five of whom reached adulthood. His mother, Abigail, lived with them until her death in 1725. Col. John was prominent in Duxbury affairs and in the church. That meetings must have been held in the house is indicated by the 32 chairs found in the house when his property was inventoried for the estate in 1739. That long inventory shows a well furnished house with luxuries earlier generations may not have had. His wife died about the same time.

Ownership of the property now fell to Captain Samuel Alden. This young man was not yet thirty years old (an older brother had died), but he had not been at home for many years, having gone early to sea and having his home in England. Though he apparently had no interest in returning to Duxbury, his father had no will and thus the homestead fell to him. His brother, Briggs Alden, aged 16, and his sister Abigail, 12 years old, were left alone. (Abigail may actually have lived with a sister or elsewhere.)

Briggs continued to live in the house and tend the land, perhaps with an agreement with Samuel. At 18, in 1741, he married Mercy Wadsworth, age 17.

Samuel died at age 45 years, in 1757, probably without ever visiting his property. After eighteen years of tenancy, Briggs became the owner through his brother's will. That Samuel was kind to his brother was fortuitous for the Alden family; otherwise the property might have been sold to settle Samuel's estate in England.

When Briggs received the homestead, it consisted of about 100 acres. He also had property elsewhere and was a prosperous and prominent man. He served as moderator of the town and representative to the Great and General Court of Massachusetts and was a leader in the church.

Briggs and Mercy had nine children. In April, 1775, when the call came to the local minutemen, four of their sons marched to war: Judah, age 25, 2nd Lieutenant; Nathaniel, 23, sergeant; Samuel, 18 private; and Amherst, 16, fifer. After a struggle with loyalist feelings, Briggs threw his support to the colonial cause. Son Samuel was a casualty of the war.

Briggs died in 1796, and, having provided for his other children, left the homestead to his youngest child, Amherst, then 36 years old and unmarried. The will also stipulated that Amherst's mother, Mercy, and his sister, Edith, be given convenient room in the house, and provided with firewood.

Amherst only owned the house eight years and he never married. Upon his death in 1804, he left the house to his oldest brother Judah, again providing for the care of his mother and sister, adding that they should have suitable conveyance to meeting.

Judah Alden had already built the large house which still stands at the corner of Alden and Tremont Streets. He was the owner of a popular store across the street from his house, where he held forth in trading and story-telling. The business of the store, however, was managed by his son, John, whereby he became known as "Storekeeper John." Upon Judah's death in 1845, he left the house "he now lives in" to John.

Storekeeper John Alden had brought his bride, Mary Winsor, affectionately known as "Aunt Polly," to the old house upon their marriage in 1811. His grandmother, Mercy, and his Aunt Edith were probably still living there, though both passed away within five years. John and Polly had three surviving children.

John continued to run the store until his death in 1871. Though he had two sons, he challenged tradition by leaving the house to his wife outright.

Mary "Aunt Polly" Alden was past eighty years when she inherited the house. Through the years she had shared her home with several generations and at this time her two sons, whose wives had died and whose children were living elsewhere, were living with her. Rather than leave the house to one and leave the other homeless, she devised her will, leaving half the house to each man. She lived in the house until she was 93 years old.

Capt. Jack, who had spent his career at sea, was 69 when he inherited the eastern half of the house. It appears that he never considered any other place his home.

The western half of the house was bequeathed Aunt Polly's other son, Henry P. Alden. His rooms were smaller, but he had the use of the ell, so that the town of Duxbury assessed him \$100. more than the property of his brother.

Jack was expansive and talkative. When the train track was built through the yard, he tacked a sign on the side of the house and charged 25 cents for a tour - at least of his half of it. Even then, over 110 years ago, there was interest in seeing this venerable home of John and Priscilla Alden. He decorated his half of the house flamboyantly and lived "a carefree and independent existence, enjoying every minute and caring nothing for anyone's opinion."

Henry was apparently quiet and conservative, leaving very little impression on the townspeople, and making few changes in the house. That he and Jack agreed on very little is apparent from the pictures of the house at the time, with new shingles on half the house and half the barn.

Jack sold his half of the house to his son Frank four years before his death, but continued to live there until his death in 1887. Frank then mortgaged the property and rented it to his brother, John W. Alden, who moved in with his wife Sylvia and their nine children.

Henry died in 1891 and left the property to his son, Henry B. Alden of Plymouth. Henry B. sold his half to John W. Alden, who now owned half and rented half.

In 1896, John W. bought his brother's half and the next day sold the whole house to John T. Alden of St. Louis, Missouri, who held the mortgage.

John T. Alden apparently had big plans to restore the house, and John W. seems to have thought that he would be allowed to live on in the house, perhaps as custodian or curator. Unfortunately, there were no written agreements. John T. Alden's health failed, and he was declared incompetent to handle his affairs. John and Sylvia had to leave the homestead and went to live with a daughter, where they died in the 1920's.

John T. Alden's court appointed guardian sold the house to the Alden Kindred of America on November 13, 1907.

The House Today

This August will mark the 98th consecutive meeting of the Alden Kindred of America. The John Alden

House has been lovingly cared for by generations of the Alden Kindred, with management of the house vested in a board.

This year, the house will be open for guided tours seven days a week, from mid-May until Mid-October. Hours are 10am-5pm except Sundays noon-5pm. Special tours may also be arranged. In addition, the staff provides outreach to the community, particularly to schools and senior citizens. For information, call 781-934-9092. The house is located on Alden Street in Duxbury, Massachusetts. The mailing address is PO Box 2754, Duxbury, MA 02331.



Alden House Museum Information Page



To: All users (All Users)
From: AAA/David Slater

14 JUL 98
03:28pm

Subject: Database Access

Mary has installed a web page to access the Patriot Ledger, Novelist and Gale Databases.

You can get there from the OCLN Homepage (www.ocln.org) or from the database page www.ocln.org/databases.html -

Mary has also submitted the IP addresses to the vendors, they may not have completed the setup so please wait until Friday before reporting problems.

Also, please report problems via email and include the IP address(es) and the specific database(s).

Thanks,
Dave

<enter>, Top, # of screen, Del, Ans, Fwd,
Quit, Next\Last letter, Print :